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Looking Backward

Ellis Mount

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Most special libraries are more or less forced by space limitations to set arbitrary limits on the size of their collections. An interesting study of this topic was written by Donald A. Redmond in the Summer 1966 issue of *Sci-Tech News.* (1) Because of its length, it will be summarized here, but it does offer a lot of meaty data in its entirety.

He noted that special libraries are definitely unlike the research libraries which are members of the Association of Research Libraries. ARL has a qualification of one million volumes for its members. Even that collection size alone seems to exclude some public libraries not qualifying as having "research" collections.

On the other hand, special libraries not in academic institutions have much smaller collections. A study made by Kruzas (2) in 1965, found that 57% of all special libraries had fewer than 10,000 volumes, and within this group 80% of company- sponsored libraries had less than 10,000 items. Understandably, collections of less than 20,000 were even fewer; 74% of all special libraries, and 94% of company libraries, were in this category. It is likely these figures are apt to hold for present day special libraries.

Redmond points out some of the ways by which an optimum size is maintained. Membership in duplicate exchanges was one; he notes that the Sci-Tech Division's duplicate exchange program had about 105 participating libraries at that time. Questionnaires sent to members of that division as well as to some librarians in the Metals/ Materials division revealed that, of the 98 libraries which took part in the survey, 80% of them discarded material regularly (chiefly periodicals) and that 63% of them endeavored to keep collection sizes within a maximum size. So the goal of an optimum size was fairly widespread in the special library community.

As to what they discarded, 55% discarded only periodicals, 24% discarded both periodicals and books, and the rest a mixture of materials. Discarding according to date of publication was the method used by half the respondents. As might be expected, the retention date varied according to type of publications; on the average, newspapers were kept one month, trade magazines one year, and up to 20 years for more significant publications. Core journals were usually the only ones bound.

In considering this topic in terms of modern developments, the rise of full-text CD-ROM collections will certainly increase the practice of weeding original copies of journals (if libraries do indeed keep subscribing to certain journals once considered important to the collection.) High costs of journals in the sci- tech world may be a real factor in reducing collections sizes; if libraries drop subscriptions, there is less to weed.

So the question of collection sizes is dependent upon more than space these days; life gets more complicated, it seems.

1. Redmond, Donald A. Optimum size: the special library viewpoint. *Sci-Tech News.* 25:40-42; 1966 Summer.

2. Kruzas, A. T. *Special libraries and information centers.* Detroit: Gale Research Company; 1965.

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